A Fine Old American Craftsman

Duncan Phyfe Furniture At the Metropolitan

By Royal Cortissoz

The usefulness of the Metropolitan Museum is never more effectively demonstrated than in what it does for American art. Some of the best of its special exhibitions have been of leading figures in our painting and sculpture. The big gallery devoted to such affairs is now given over to an American craftsman, a cabinet maker who came from Scotland to this country in the late eighteenth century, settled in Albany, migrated thence to New York and flourished here until his death in 1854. His name was Duncan Phyfe. It hasn't the brilliance in the history of furniture that belongs, say, to the name of Sheraton, whom he emulated. But it is an honorable designation, held in growing regard among collectors, and the present exhibition will doubtless serve to give it an even stronger status. Mr. Charles O. Cornelius, assistant curator in the department of decorative arts, has shown both ingenuity and taste in the disposition of the objects lent by private owners. The vast space has been delightfully broken up by partitions jutting from the walls and in the three-sided rooms thus made possible the furniture has been associated with early American paintings and other appropriate accessories. The characteristic sentiment of a period is in this way revived. Since numerous collectors have sent to the museum pieces showing Phyfe at his best, the occasion is altogether favorable to study of his traits.

Cabinet Making

Its Status in New York in an Earlier Day

They are the traits of a man of taste who had in him a streak of independence, if not of originality. A collection of tables, chairs, sofas and soon would hardly seem to be a promising source of creative ideas, and Phyfe is not precisely an inventive type. He has not even that gusto, that assertive energy, which will sometimes lift work of craftsmanship above the ordinary level of its tradition and give it something of the salient, personal quality of a masterpiece. Consider the distinctive character of the great desk now in the Louvre, which Oeben and Reisener made for the King. It stands out as unique in a period crowded with fine furniture. Phyfe handn't the facility for the tour de force that underlies that memorable achievement. And yet, we repeat, he had an independent personal touch.

The British school from which he sprang was remarkable for linear and decoratice delicacy. It is an expressive, in its way, of eighteenth century elegance, as the French school itself an, as, indeed, a more classical purity and serenity. Phyfe was a not unworthy disciple of its light handling of furniture problems. But he would carry the lightness only just so far. At the core of his work there is an element of austerity which is traceable, in all probability, to his Scotch origin. In a word, he knew how to be graceful but he remains faithful to an almost ascetic simplicity. A certain firm strength is his leading characteristic. His daintiest sewing table has an unmistakable dignity. Line never runs away with him. There is nothing redundant about the curves of those supports which he places under a sofa or a table. In fact, if he gives the admirer pause anywhere it is in the rather sharp direction often taken by those self-same supports. One can imagine a line fuller, more flowing, more exquisite. But he was keeping his eye very narrowly on construction. His table legs may not be the most beguilingly graceful in the world, but there is a kind of sturdy power in them. After all, there was Scotch blood in this accomplished American. He was a furniture builder as well as an artist. His ornamentation leaves the same impression of a designer shrewdly reserving himself, developing a motive with the coolest discretion. There is often a positively Greek blitheness in pure Sheraton. Phyfe tempers it with his instinctive severity. His taste was impeccable, yet, if we may risk the paradox, it was not notably sensitive. For confirmation of this look at his use of metal, especially in those claws of brass which terminate the legs of his tables. They are unlovely in themselves and they have the air of decorations applied, not growing out of the design itself. He is safer when he sticks to the mahogany, a material he understood and, obviously, loved. The leafage he carved upon a piece of furniture gains from his judgmatic avoidance of decorative virtuosity. Just as he had no inkling of the sculptural beauty to be got out of metal so he knew nothing of the ornamentation that is cultivated for its own sake. He kept it well in hand, cut it in a forthright almost artless way, and left it, in the upshot, beautifully part and parcel of the whole piece of furniture.

In a brief and interesting paper contributed to the Bulletin, Mr. Halsey and Mr. Cornelius have something to say about the period which gave Phyfe his opportunity. New York was being made over in the earlier decades of the nineteenth century. Commercial prosperity led to the building of many handsome houses. Phyfe was called upon to furnish them. He did his work for a community that was not exactly rich in aesthetic ideas, but that nevertheless wanted some refined adornments to go with its solid, "warm" conditions. He had begun on the basis of the English style then popular, but, though he remained at bottom steadily faithful to Sheraton, he also threw himself with ardor into the exploitation of French ideas as they were codified in the Napoleonic era. It is easy to understand how their architectural character appealed to him. The rigid style of the Empire played right into the hands of a man as sober as Duncan Phyfe.

There is a growing cult for him today, tinctured more or less by that extravagance which generally goes with cults. Appreciation of him is perfectly compatible, to tell the truth, with realization of the fact that the charm of his work is not invariably compelling. His sofas are uniformly successful. On the other hand, if some of his tables are merely adorable others are merely commonplace, the routine products of a workshop which could hardly be expected to possess an ever-functioning inspiration. Phyfe, we gather, was not that kind of a man; he had more knowledge, more taste, than temperament. But in craftsmanship, in the strict sense, he and his colleagues would appear to have been true inheritors of the eighteenth century tradition. The finish of his wood is beyond praise. His construction has worn superbly. For these reasons, as well as for the quality of design he illustrates, a deep educational value is to be attached to this exhibition. Recent developments in American industrial art have shown in dubious devotion to medieval and Renaissance types. Fashion, we are told, has had much to do with this. It is to be hoped that fashion will take note of the objects at the museum and hence lead to increased study of Phyfe among the manufacturers.

British Portraits

A Good Group of Eighteenth Century Paintings

Only twelve paintings are hung in the exhibition of eighteenth century portraits at the Tooth gallery, but the little collection is extraordinarily varied in character. Two Americans figure in it, West and Stuart. The example of West is a charming bit of mythology, a "Venus Instructing Cupid," which recalls Angelica Kauffman only to give one a pleasurable sense of the vigor which our painter substitutes for her insipidity. The Stuart is the "Marquis of Waterford," a really British study of a thoroughly British type. Technically it is one of the most spirited canvases of Stuart's we have ever seen, as dashing as a Goya and far more precise. The portrait is an instructive illustration of the American master's ability to rise above the tradition to which he owed so much, or rather, to imbue that tradition with a brio all his own. This virile performance falls naturally into association with two other portraits of men here, the "Captain William Greer," by Romney, and the "William, 9th Lord Napier," by Raeburn. All three are brisk, vivid interpretations of manly character and examples of fluent, masterful brushwork. The Raeburn is exceptional. He had only too often his thin, papery moods. In this instance he is at the height of his powers, broad, forceful, absolutely masculine and authoritative.

The example of Reynolds, the "Sir John Thorold," is a crisply painted, not uninteresting portrait, though hardly as arresting as the trio just cited. Lawrence is represented by the "John Hunter," which has been exhibited at this gallery before, a beautiful piece of painting, especially about the head. Of the portraits of women the most aggressively appealing is the "Mrs. George Rogers," by Francis Cotes. He is ordinarily a rather placid painter. Here he is astonishingly ebullient, so swift in attack, so free and forcible in his handling, that one regrets the more the rather commonplace nature of the color scheme and especially the lifeless flesh tints. Less noticeable for nervous force, but infinitely more charming is West, to strengthen the exhibition in that variety to which we have alluded. The two rooms, saturated in tradition, are yet fairly modern in their vitality.

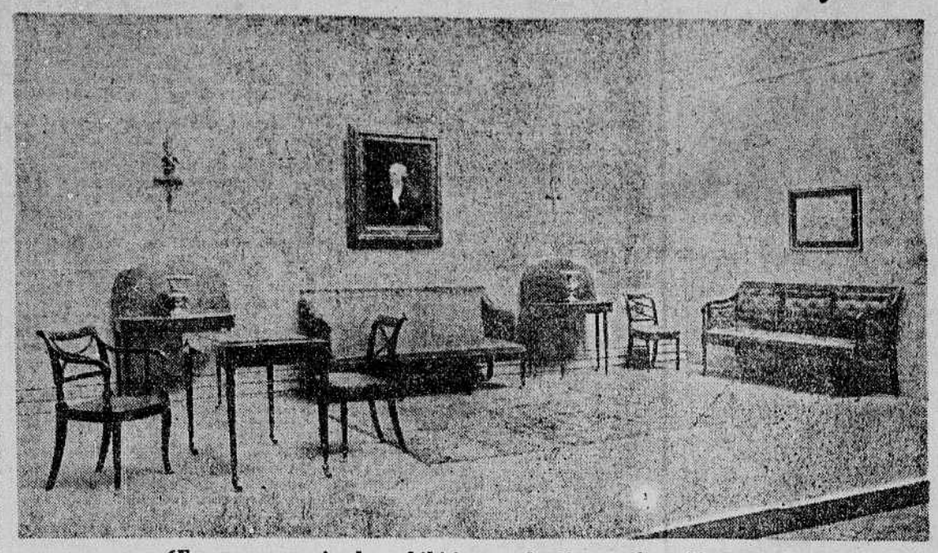
New Pictures

The Women Painters and an Independent Salon

The National Association of Women Painters and Sculptors is holding at the Fine Arts Building its thirty-second annual exhibition. The prize-winning canvas in it is Miss Camelia Whitehurst's full length of a child, "Charlotte Hundley," a clever piece of summary brush work. It is clear from the tribute paid to this portrait, which occupies the best place in the main gallery, that the association would do honor to technical adroitness. Miss Whitehurst discloses in this portrait, and even more in her other exhibit, "Little May," a manual facility and boldness suggesting the rude bravura of Mr. George Luks. Incidentally she points a moral.

The association believes in good technique and on every hand reveals a lively ambition to foster it. The exhibition is full of work revealing earnest effort. It contains discouragingly little in which ambition is accompanied by the natural, personal gift which alone will make a painting interesting. There are canvases which would successfully assert themselves anywhere, in an exhibition made by men as well as in one made by women. They are the canvases of Mary Cassatt, Ellen Emmet Rand, Cecilia Beaux. A few pieces here and there fall into the same category, the "Portrait o. Mrs. Maurice Leon," by Hilda Belcher; the portrait called "At the Italian Booth," by Constance Curtis; the paintings by Christine Herter. Matilda Browne, Ann Crane, Susan Ricker Knox and Maud Mason. But these things, creditable as they are, cannot leaven the lump, or not disperse the atmosphere of well-

Furniture From the Workshop of Duncan Phyfe



(From a group in the exhibitio n at the Metropolitan Museum)

Maria and Her Dog Sylvio

(From the painting by Wright of Derby, at the Tooth Gallery)

men should be what it is, graceful, though conventional in composition, beautifully drawn and of a true painter-like quality throughout. The background is capital in itself, a luscious expanse of rich brown tone, broken by a limpid sky. There are pictures by Opie and one or two others in the show, including the Rev. M. W. Peters, who, like Wright, is seldom seen on this side of the water. "The Pet Hare" is a typical bit of eighteenth century sentiment, wholesomely sweet. It well serves, as the Wright does, and the commonplace. There are a few good pieces of sculpture on view, notably Miss Harriet Frishmuth's "Globe Sun Dial" and Miss Prahar's "Impression," but in this department also there is a paucity of anything like distinction. It seems, perhaps, ungracious to say so, but distinction, individuality, the strong personal contribution, is sadly missing among the bulk of the exhibitors.

Distinction does not visit at all the exhibition which is being made at the Anderson Galleries by the organizers of the "Salons of America." This society, founded by the late Hamilton Easter Field, stated in its prospectus, issued some time ago, that its membership was made up "from nearly every representative group in America, conservative, modern, radical and the rest." Doubtless the statement is accurate, but the show just opened as an "Autumn Salon" looks like nothing so much as a pendant to the last "Independent" affair at the Waldorf. That is to say, it is composed of a vast amount of forcible-feeble stuff, amateurish mediocrity, with a fragment of more or less accomplished painting occasionally straying into view. There is some ability in the nudes by L. H. Parsons and Robert Philipp. The mother and child in Grace H. Turnbull's "Twilight" are pleasantly drawn. In general the exhibits are dull revelations of the desire rather than the ability to paint. It is hard to see what good purpose is served by enterprises of this sort. The only hypothesis on which we can explain them is that almost anybody who slaps paint onto a canvas likes to see the result placed on public view.

Max

His Brilliant Satire Upon the Pre-Raphaelites

A new book by Max Beerbohm is welcome at any time, but there are, for us, special reasons for rejoicing over the latest, an early copy of which we had had the luck to receive on its arrival from London. He calls it "Rossetti and His Circle," and it contains a sheaf of about twenty of those faintly touched drawings, wakened into a greater animation by pale washes of color, in which he proves that a piercing caricaturist need not necessarily be a faultless draughtsman. The drawings bear legends, long and short, which are half the fun.

In a prefatory note Max explains, with an ironic apology, his predilection for the past. He continues: "Perhaps you have never heard of Rossetti. In this case I must apologize still more profusely. But even you, flushed with pride of your Victorian era. Rossetti belonged to that—though he was indeed born nine years before it began, and died of it nineteen years before it was over, for eighteen-fifties-and-sixties at all. For me, I confess, they are very romantic, a wasn't alive in them and partly because Rossetti was. . . . I must warn you, before parting, not to regard as perfectly authentic any of the portraits that I here present to you. Rossetti 'to my gaze was ne'er vouchsaved.' . . . Old drawings and paintings, early photographs and the accounts of eye-witnesses have not, however, been my only aids. I have had another and surer aid, of the most curious kind imaginable. And some day I will tell you all about it if you would care to hear."

We will have to wait for light on that "aid" to the absolutely convincing portraiture Max has achieved; but in the mean time we feel that we know just how he arrived at the twinkling mood of this book. Years ago we responded to the romantic spell that Rossetti and his friends have had for Max. There in one corner of the library are hanged the souvenirs of an unfaltering sympathy. All the works are there, and all the biographies, and all the critical studies, and, of course, all the interminable lucubrations of William Michael Rossetti, the devoutest of brothers. It is fascinating, much of this stuff. But there are moments, glancing back over the mass, in which you find the sublime seriousness of the "circle" one of the drollest things on earth, and, in Andrew Lang's phrase, you "let a laugh out of yourself." That is what Max has done. Rossetti would have done it himself. Perhaps he did enjoy a quiet chuckle now and then. Max credits him with one in a drawing which shows the artist confronting his sister in a room whose chairs are draped with gorgeous materials. The text runs:

Rossetti, having just had a fresh consignment of stunning fabrics from that new shop in Regent Street, tries hard to prevail on his younger sister to accept at any rate one of these and have a dress made of it from designs to be furnished by himself.

D. G. R.: "What is the use, Christina, of having a heart like a singing bird and a watershoot and all the rest of it, if you insist on getting yourself up like a pew-opener?"

C. R. "Well, Gabriel, I don't know—I'm sure you yourself always dress very quietly."

In another design Rossetti pauses at the foot of a ladder leaned against one of his mural decorations and listens to the Master of Balliol. Max proceeds to give us the sole remark likely to have been made by Benjamin Jowett about the paintings on the walls of the Oxford Union: "And what were they going to do with the Grail when they found it, Mr. Rossetti?" The legends are all like that, delectably in character. And in this respect the drawings are positively clairvoyant. The one of Carlyle and Whistler needs no more than the two words affixed to it, "Blue China." The dandified little painter declaiming beside a vase as high as he is himself, the bilious seer towering above him, are both interpretations "of the center."

No one 'scapes whipping. We see Rossetti in the garden, kangaroo, wombat and adorers all exciting the bewilderment of Mr. William Bell Scott. We see Leighton, before the knighthood, toploftically pleading with Rossetti to enter the R. A. We see Swinburne, now reading "Anactoria" to Gabriel and William and now taking his "great new friend Gosse" to see the great panjandrum. Nor is Tennyson forgotten. One of the howling masterpieces in the book is dedicated to "Woolner at Farringford," working on a bust of the poet, what time Mrs. Tennyson remarks: "You know, Mr. Woolner, I'm one of the most un-meddlesome of women, but when (I'm only asking), when do you begin modelling his halo?"

The deftness of Max is shown nowhere more subtly than in the mysteriously likable air he contrives to give to Rossetti himself. It is very true. The poet was not half as absurd as the egregious crowd that revolved about him. We think again of how he would have laughed over Max's shoulder. The drawing of "Ford Madox Brown Being Patronized by Holman Hunt" would have fairly crumpled him up. He would have savored to the last dreg the satire upon Theodore Watts, getting his hand in for his career as policeman to Swinburne by shooing Hall Caine and his "literary efforts" away from Rossetti. There is one doubtful note in the book. At the end Max commemorates the introduction of the Rossettian vogue into the United States, figuring Oscar Wilde on the lecture platform, lily in hand, in 1881, as the path breaker. The types among the listeners are too grotesque to be funny. The drawing is forced. But it is the only one thus handicapped. In all the others Max is as spontaneous as he is witty.

Globe Sundial

(From the sculpture by Harriet W. Frishmath at the Fine Arts Building)

The Marquis of Waterford

(From the portrait by Gilbert Stuart at the Tooth Gallery)

Random Impressions In Current Exhibition

The first of the season's print shows at the Knoedler gallery has just been opened and will remain on view until the end of the month. It is given to lithographs by Mr. Bolton Brown.

The exhibition of the National Association of Women Painters and Sculptors, touched upon elsewhere on this page to-day, lasts until October 30. Beginning November 3 it will be shown for a month at the Corcoran Gallery, in Washington.

More than once during the last few years the Tissot water colors illustrating the life of Christ have been placed in storage in the Brooklyn Museum, owing to lack of space in the picture galleries. Now they have been established permanently in the western gallery on the third floor. A new catalogue has been published to go with the collection.

There is a strange picture to be seen at the Bourgeois gallery, "The Jungle," by Henri Rousseau. The gigantic growths of the forest are painted not in a dense tangle, but in a curiously ordered pattern with weird blooms of white, yellow and blue accenting the prevailing dull green. A pallid moon is lifted above the horizon, to look down on a rather conventionalized lion at the center of the composition. At first blush this animal appears to be devouring a leopard, but according to the picture's sub title he is really "fighting a crocodile." It is not a very thrilling conflict. In fact the whole design has a puzzling, immobile character, only nominally suggestive of nature. A mild interest attaches to the pattern, which has, however, neither beauty nor any new, suggestive significance.

The Montclair Art Museum is holding an exhibition of sketches and small paintings, which will remain until November 19. Among those contributing are Joseph H. Boston, R. Sloan-Bredin, John E. Costigan, Harry Leith-Ross, Egbert Nichols, Gardner Symons and Maud M. Mason.

A collection of pastels by Glenn C. Henshaw is now on exhibition at the Vanderbilt Hotel. Mr. Henshaw, a student in Paris of Leon Bonnat and Jean Paul Laurens, presents American scenic subjects, featuring those in and around New York.

At the new Ainslie galleries, which are more spacious, better lighted and in every way more attractive than the old ones, there are two exhibitions. One is made up of "fantasies" by Mr. James Francis Brown, from "this world of make-believe." Mr. Brown has engaging ideas, but lacks, as yet, the skill with which to give them true artistic life. The root of the matter is in him. The best of his nineteen pictures, "The Judge: Old Art or the New," has some good painting in the curtain that fills the background. There is a suggestion of quality here. But as a rule this artist is technically heavy handed, where the nature of his fancy demands swift fluency, lightness and grace.

In the neighboring room there are a number of recent portraits by Mr. Howard Chandler Christy, long known as a popular illustrator. In embarking upon his new activities he has the benefit of facile though not at all distinguished draughtsmanship. He draws his heads and hands well enough. But in his style and especially in his gay coloration, totally without quality, he makes an ambitious canvas in oils look like a magazine cover. The preservation of a good likeness hardly atones for the garish, brittle character of his studies.

The City Club is holding an exhibition of nine portraits by as many American artists. Gordon Stevenson, De Witt Lockman, Sidney Dickenson and James Britton are among the painters represented.

Armenian art from the sixth to the thirteenth century comprises an exhibition at the Avery library, Columbia University. There is a collection of water colors and drawings by Archag Fetvadjian, reproducing important Armenian art relics which survived the Turkish conquests. These drawings were shown at the Louvre, the Victoria and Albert and the South Kensington museums.

Two Japanese artists who are carrying on the traditions of their ancestors in the print field are Messrs. Shinzui and Hasui, an exhibition of whose work is being held in the co-operative gallery at the Art Center. Shinsui has two attractive portraits with much of the simplicity, linear grace and rich color of his more famous predecessors. The color of his compatriot's landscapes is less pronounced. These examples lack some of the expected decorative subtlety and perspective and the color is sometimes monotonous. There is a lively winter scene, however, and a street with figures by Hasui, both nicely composed.

At Weyhe's there is a collection of early maps of the Old World and America, dating from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century. They are of a type being used more and more in decoration, beautifully engraved specimens of artistic attraction as well as historic interest. An interesting phase in their embellishment is the practical introduction of animals, trees and habitations on land and creatures of the sea in the marine areas to denote the characteristics of the clime. These are often beautifully done, though frequent grounds for expression of extravagant fancy in the absence of scientific fact. The oldest map of the lot is a world as viewed in 1493 by a Nuremberg cartographer. Ornamentation came later with engraving, however, in notably brilliant specimens executed by the Dutch. One of the best in color is the early map of the Azores. It is emblazoned with scroll vignettes and ornamental titles. An early map of eastern America bears a view of New Amsterdam, said to be the first picturization of the settlement, then a mere village with a gallows where the aquarium stands. A 16[illegible] view shows a clearly defined survey of the Chesapeake Bay and is set off with a rich engraving of Pocahontas. Among the famous map makers represented are Vischer, Mercator, Janssen, Moll, Sennex and Lotter.

Announcements have gone out from the Society of Independent Artists announcing the date and the provisions of the seventh annual exhibition. There no jury, no prize event will be repeated this time on the roof of the Waldorf-Astoria, from February 24 to March 11, 1923.